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ABSTRACT

A practicum (which took place at a high school in an urban community in the Southeastern United States) was designed to give high school students the opportunity to gain writing skills that meet the challenge of real-world demands. Students need to be competent in basic skills, the use of computers, and applications that meet workplace challenges to be successful in a competitive global work world. A portfolio was developed which required students to produce a written and oral response to simulated business situations, meet the criteria acceptable in the business world, and use various computer software programs to produce a final product. Observation of participants revealed students working as teams, consulting with other students and teachers, and teaching each other. A review of students' portfolios indicated enhanced language skills, written and oral. Contains 29 references; a student survey is attached. (RS)

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Teaching High School Students to Write for Life Outside of School

by
Lorraine Rushing Knight
Cluster 88

A Practicum I Report Presented to
the Ed.D. Program in Child and Youth Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

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Abstract

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This practicum was designed to give high school students the opportunity to gain writing skills that meet the challenge of real-world demands. Students need to be competent in basic skills, the use of computers, and applications that meet workplace challenges to be successful in a competitive global work world.

The writer developed a portfolio which required students to produce a written and oral response to simulated business situations, meet the criteria acceptable in the business world, and use various computer software programs to produce a final product.

Observation of participants revealed students working as teams, consulting with other students and teachers, and teaching each other. A review of students' portfolios indicated enhanced language skills, written and oral.

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments iii

Abstract v

Chapter I: Introduction 1
Description of Community 1
Writer's Work Setting 1
Writer's Role 2

Chapter II: Study of the Problem 3
Problem Statement 3
Problem Description 3
Problem Documentation 4
Causative Analysis 4
Relationship of the Problem to the Literature 5

Chapter III: Anticipated Outcomes and Evaluation Instruments 10
Goals and Expectations 10
Expected Outcomes 10
Measurement of Outcomes 10

Chapter IV: Solution Strategy 12
Discussion and Evaluation of Solutions 12
Description of Selected Solutions 15
Report of Action Taken 16

Chapter V: Results 23
Results 23
Discussion 24
Recommendations 29
Dissemination 29

References 30

Appendix
A Technology Utilization – Student Survey 34

Chapter I: Introduction

Description of Community

The practicum took place at a high school in an urban community in the Southeastern United States. The population of the county in which the school is located exceeds 150,000. The ethnographic composition of the county is 72.9% White, 24.1% Black, and 3% other.

Per capita income of the county exceeds $13,000, which is slightly lower than the state's $16,000. Of the county's total population 12% are below poverty level, compared to 15% statewide. The majority of the population is employed in government (29.4%) and manufacturing (26.7%). The population's educational attainments are higher than the state's, with those holding high school diplomas at 36.5% for the county and 30.3% for the state; however, the county's non-degreed population (22.1%) falls below the state's average (18.2%). Of the high school's graduates, 55.8% enter college.

Writer's Work Setting

The work setting in which the problem was occurring is in a high school located in a prominent neighborhood. The school district's total student enrollment exceeds 29,000; the high school services over 2,300 students. The student population is drawn from surrounding rural (35%) and urban (65%) communities. Students can elected to take courses which are categorized in communication and the arts; business and information systems; engineering, industrial, and environmental; and health, human, and public services.

The mission of the high school, "a unique, safe public school committed to excellence and supported by a socially, culturally diverse community, is to prepare each

student to become a productive citizen through educational experiences consisting of a challenging curriculum, advanced technology, and leadership opportunities."

Several features make the work setting at the high school unique.

- The school's standardized test scores rank among the highest in the state.
- On the Basic Skills Assessment Program (BSAP), 86% of the high school's students scored above the 50th percentile.
- The 2,300 students attend classes in a physical structure built to accommodate 1,200; 48 mobile units are located on campus to facilitate the student population.
- The high school's student to teacher ratio (23.4) is one of the highest in the state.

The student population is culturally and ethnically diverse. The ethnic composition of the high school is approximately 78% White, 17% Black, and 5% other. The faculty also represents cultural diversity with 14 of the 114 members belonging to ethnic minorities. The cultural diversity and wide spectrum of educational training and experience of the faculty members are utilized in program development and unit lesson planning.

Writer's Role

The writer is a secondary English teacher at the high school. The writer teaches College Preparatory English II and Technical Preparatory English III. She has 12 years experience in business and industry as a certified public accountant and has taken the courses necessary to gain expertise in teaching Technical Preparation English courses.

Chapter II: Study of the Problem

Problem Statement

The problem to be solved in this practicum was that high school students' writing skills were not meeting the challenge of the workplace/real-world demands. Students were not prepared for the writing applications required in the workplace.

Problem Description

Today competent writing skills encompass the ability to compose various forms of writing which range from literature critiques to technical writing. The mastery of effective language usage skills as well as the utilization of technological equipment is necessary to prepare students for continuing education and/or the workplace. Life outside of school requires the ability to apply communication skills in diverse and often unique formats. In a dynamic global economy, future communicators must be adaptable to technological growth. To become adaptable to innovation and growth, practice and experience with real-world demands of writing skills and application is necessary.

Although the school's student population exceeds the ideal number and limits equipment availability per student, the high school has the technological equipment needed for preparing students to use writing and language usage skills along with technological skills demanded in life outside of school with technology. The large number of students and the need to maintain workable scheduling preclude an interdisciplinary curriculum which would integrate business, technology, and English skills. The opportunities afforded for students to practice and apply workplace/real-world skills and use technological equipment are minimal. This practicum increased the opportunities for students to apply real-world writing skills.

Problem Documentation

Evidence of this problem was found by polling students, reviewing students' grades maintained by the writer in English classes, and by interviewing business leaders. The results of an informal student survey of 45 students in the writer's 3 sections of English III classes revealed the following: only 21 students have used computer word processing software for class assignments, 28 have used the Internet, and 18 have used graphic software. Students' grades, as recorded in the teacher's grade book, reflect that only 9 out of 45 students in Technological Preparatory English III achieved a passing score of 70% or above based on criteria for competency in applied writing skills. Interviews with business leaders and employers revealed that one of the most frequent causes of dissatisfaction with student employees is their inadequate language usage skills and inability to utilize technological equipment to enhance their communication skills. The writer has observed that many students will opt to receive a zero rather than complete an assignment requiring real-world applications or computers. They lack the writing skills or the ability to apply the skills in solving problems.

Causative Analysis

There are a number of causative factors which lead to the problem of students' writing skills not meeting the challenge of the workplace/real-world demands. Students are not required to use technology when completing written English assignments. Students expressed their concerns about their inability to complete an assignment requiring the use of word processing, graphics, and the Internet. The writer investigated the students' expressed concerns by informally polling high school English teachers. The

survey revealed that few, if any, assignments are required to be completed using the technological tools available at the school.

Another causative factor is that real-world applications in technology are not included in objective requirements in many English classes. An informal discussion with students covering the requirements of an assignment revealed the possible cause, their lack of confidence in language usage and inexperience in utilizing computers. A questionnaire completed by English teachers was used to investigate the cause. Of the 21 teachers responding, 85% did not require English assignments to resonate with real-world applications and standards or be completed using word processing on a regular basis.

Teachers do not require students to apply communication skills to real-world situations. The review of English III Tech Prep teachers' lesson plans gave no indication of written communication being transmitted from the classroom to outside sources, such as letters or e-mail. An informal poll of English teachers was the instrument used to investigate the cause. The results of the poll of 15 English teachers revealed that students were not given assignments requiring any written form of correspondence with others.

Relationship of the Problem to the Literature

A literature review suggested that other professionals in other settings are concerned that high school graduates' writing does not meet real-world demands. As the concerns of college professors, employers, and government officials grow, educational reform is focusing in on improving basic skills and the ability to apply these skills. One of the foremost concerns is high school graduates' inability to meet real-world writing demands. Day and Koorland (1997) reported that the essential language skills required for the future are the ability to effectively communicate in written or oral forms using

technology. Fey (1997) stressed the need for the use for computers in teaching literacy to prepare students for responding to the radical changes occurring in a global society. According to the National Governor's Association (1990), the United States recognized the pending crisis and has developed workplace literacy programs emphasizing skills needed to meet the demands of new technologies and to compete in a global society. Anderson (1992) emphasizes the need for reform of secondary school programs that prepare students with the basic skills needed to meet real-life challenges in the workplace. As reported by McLarty and Palmer (1994), an assessment of students' skills in writing, applied technology, and locating information determined that they are inadequate for the work force. The Illinois State Council on Vocational Education (1991) polled 1,146 business representatives to identify and rank-order 9 basic skills; writing was ranked 1st on the list which also included computer literacy; knowledge of technology systems ranked 9th. The Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) requires educators to use applications rather than academic-emphasized approaches to teach skills that prepare students for business world demands (Harrison, 1992).

Evidence of students' writing skills not meeting real-world demands was found in many settings. Higher institutes of learning, businesses, as well as graduates themselves have recognized that the problem exists. Vasu and Frazier (1989) surveyed 2,334 North Carolina employers and found that they believe 51.2% of high school graduates possess inadequate communication skills for entry-level positions. Out of the 1,150 employers who responded, 53.9% rated high school graduates' reading skills as adequate, while 51.8% believed high school graduates writing skills are inadequate. The problem of

finding high school or community college graduates with the skills necessary to meet employers' needs is increasing according to 69.4% of employers surveyed.

A study by Jenni, et al (1997) found that three years after graduation, Northfield Public Schools students felt they were not prepared with the skills necessary to make a successful transition into institutes of higher education or the workplace. Students had the least confidence in their skills of using technological literacy, gathering information, communicating orally, and writing. Among the most frequently encountered tasks were reading and writing in which the students lacked the most confidence.

The results of a survey of 1,000 managers and college professors of business communication (of which 346 responded) included writing effectively on the list of skills necessary for new employees to get and keep jobs (Perrigo, 1994). The ability to communicate was also listed among the top characteristics for getting and keeping jobs. Perrigo suggests that professors should not only teach communication but should also help students to delve into real-world business communications by bringing technology and applied academics into the classroom. The results of a survey indicated that 75% of employers believe the workforce needs improvement in applying learning to complete practical tasks (Shubin, 1993).

Many causes for students' writing not meeting real-world demands are described in literature. According to Wolfe, Bolton, Feltovich, and Bangert (1996), a survey of 8 teachers in 7 schools who did not have computers in the classroom revealed that students do not use computers on a regular basis. In school most students spend one hour or less per week using word processing software. Of 406 students responding to a survey, 24%

reported using the computer "a lot" out of school, and 44 % use computers "a little," while 32% use computers "not at all" outside of school. The frequency of students' use of computers in school was as follows: "a lot" – 16%, "a little" – 69%, and "not at all" – 15%.

Scott and Rockwell (1997) concluded that fear of technology is found among students and employees training to use new technologies in the workplace. Dell Computer Corporation coined the term "technophobia" for the condition of computer anxiety and concluded that 55% of Americans suffer from negative feelings towards computers. Communication and writing apprehension may be contributors to technophobia; however, experience is a factor in the future use of computers and minimizes the user's anxiety. Successful integration of technology has occurred in only 3% of U.S. schools (Muhammad, 1998). Although conferences and journals often use "computers in education" as topics, few students and fewer teachers use computers in education (Johnson, 1992). According to Duckefield and Swanson (1992), today's students have few opportunities to learn and practice skills to prepare them for real-world situations. Conrad and Hedlin (1991) found projects or active learning to be more effective that the traditional classroom model.

In summary, the literature reviewed relates to the problem and work setting in that the problem is wide spread and appears in a variety of settings. The literature also supports the causes of the problem: students are not required to use technology, real-world applications in technology are not practiced in the classroom, and communication skills are not applied to real-world situations. Preparing students with the basic skills needed to compete in life outside of school, the use of computers in teaching literacy, and

the use of applications that simulate workplace challenges are recommended for giving high school graduates the opportunity to be successful in a competitive global work world.

Chapter III: Anticipated Outcomes and Evaluation Instruments

Goals and Expectations

The goal of this practicum was for English students to gain writing skills that meet the challenge of real-world applications.

Expected Outcomes

The following outcomes were projected for this practicum:

1. By the end of the implementation period, the number of students demonstrating having used computer word processing software will increase from only 21 to at least 30 out of 40 students.
2. The number of students who demonstrate having used the Internet will increase from only 28 to at least 35 out of 40 students.
3. An increase from 18 to at least 25 out of 40 students will demonstrate having used computer graphic software.
4. Students meeting the criteria required for an English unit of writing skills for real-world applications will increase from 9 to at least 29 out of 45 by the end of the practicum implementation period.

Measurement of Outcomes

The measurement of outcomes one, two, and three, the use of word processing software, the Internet, and graphic software by English students, was measured by comparing the number of students who demonstrated having used technology in completing a portfolio of documents provided by business leaders at the beginning of the 1998-99 school year to the number of those who demonstrated having used technology after the mid-year grading period. The standard of acceptable performance to

demonstrate attainment of this outcome was an increase of 9 in the number of English students who complete a portfolio of various business documents which integrates the use of technology and communication skills. Business documents were memos, business letters addressing problems encountered in workplace environments, resumes, cover letters, job and college applications, proposals for contract work, and advertisement campaigns.

The measurement of outcome four, students meeting the writing skill criteria and use of technology demanded by the life outside of school, was recorded in a grade book. The standard of achievement was that 29 out of 45 students produce writing that meets real-world demands. Writing which meets real-world demands was documents containing no errors in text or format. The assignments, the number of assignments completed containing no errors, and the type of technology utilized was recorded in the teacher's gradebook.

Chapter IV: Solution Strategy

Discussion and Evaluation of Solutions

The problem was that high school students' writing skills were not up to the challenges of the workplace/real-world demands. A literature review revealed several solutions which may be used in preparing students to meet life outside of school writing demands.

Maring and Wiseman (1997) suggested using the World Wide Web in students' communication in order to define the audience and give more meaning and purpose to student writing. Making students comfortable in a global environment requires teaching with technology by using strategies such as telecomputing (Graves, 1995). According to Horban (1998) the use of e-mail gives students the opportunity to access information from others and affords discussion which will increase their knowledge base and improve motivation. Balonek (1994) suggested that using word processing would improve student attitudes and written products.

Research enhances the quality of students' writing. Preliminary research or discussion in the classroom can help students focus on locating relevant information before research in the media center begins. Reference materials lead students to ask more questions while writing which may improve the quality of the final product. When required to present multimedia presentations, students use higher order thinking skills and decision-making in solving problems (Roche, 1994).

According to Olson (1998), students are learning skills, "new basics" or "basics-plus," which include the ability to use technology and to communicate ideas effectively,

work in groups, solve problems, and to gather and analyze data. By changing how and what is taught in the classrooms, schools can increase students' academic achievements. Olson found schools which require students to make oral presentations, work in small groups, use computers, make and defend decision, compare ideas, and combining skills of other content areas have shown improvement.

In "High Schools That Work" programs, an important feature in student success is to maintain high academic standards while using teaching strategies to which students can relate (Miller, 1997). School-to-work strategies include encouraging learning experiences through partnerships that connect academic learning and the workplace to prepare students with the skills necessary to compete (Fitzgerald, 1997). Olson (1998) defines these "new basic" skills not as defined job skills, but as skills needed for success in life. Successful programs develop collaboration between schools and businesses. Cooperative programs with businesspersons, along with newly developed teaching and career guidance strategies, enhance students' process writing skills (Adam et al., 1993).

Allowing students a choice in topics often creates greater motivation and students render better quality written products (Barry, Nielsen, Corcoran, & Glasnapp, 1997). The findings of their research on the writing process and assessment found no difference in students' writing assessment scores of those who had a choice in the topic and those who did not. They suggest that topic choice may create equity in scores of performance because students may use topics of which they have prior knowledge.

The goal of all teachers should be to graduate students who can write with unity, coherence, and accuracy. Students must be able to express ideas in written form in all content areas (Smith, 1996). High school students apply several skills from various

disciplines when challenged with projects which demand they solve problems that simulate those in the out-of-school world (Hansbarger, Clark, & Stewart, 1996). When integrating math and English curriculum into a project, they found students wrote better, took more responsibility, and demonstrated a greater interest in completing the project. Students found the work to be more significant than individual assignments.

As a result of the literature reviewed, teaching strategies and project ideas were generated:

- Daily process writing will be implemented in completing various business documents (Scott & Rockwell, 1997).
- Students will be assigned community business leaders to correspond with throughout the school term (Adam et al., 1993).
- The World Wide Web will serve as a source of gathering information for completion of projects (Maring & Wiseman, 1997).
- Projects will be developed that require technical writing and the use of technological tools (Olson, 1998).
- Written instructions will be included with each English assignment, and students will be responsible for meeting deadlines and the criteria requirements.

An overwhelming amount of literature supports the validity of integrating writing skills and the use of technology to allow students the opportunity to acquire the skills to meet real-world demands. The formation of links to business leaders gives purpose to students' writing and enhances learning.

The feasibility of implementation of each solution stated above as it pertains to the writer's setting is critiqued below. Accessibility to technological equipment is

limited at the writer's setting; therefore, using the World Wide Web on a regular basis may not be possible. Students can be required to process write daily to ease the discomfort of technophobia. In the writer's setting, high academic standards are built into the curriculum, and modifications of activities are inherent in the school's team planning concept. Implementing a schedule for students to use the computer lab to improve writing is a feasible solution. Learning partnerships can be established with business leaders in the community to reinforce the need for students' writing skills to meet the criteria demanded in the real-world. With the implementation of the four-by-four schedule in the 1998/99 school year, cooperative programs may not be as successful as desired.

Description of Selected Solutions

The writer implemented frequent use of technology in completing writing assignments that meet the standards required in the workplace. The solution relates to the causative factors in responding to student concerns to become competent in writing and the use of technology and teachers' reluctance to require students to complete assignments on computers. Students had access to the computer lab located in the media center when the lab was unoccupied. Although students missed class time, their progress was monitored by the lab technician and make-up time was allowed for missed assignments. With the increased use of computers to complete written documents, student proficiency increased, and their ability to meet criteria requirements for real-world applications improved.

Students completed a project which integrated graphic software, the Internet, and word processing software with written and oral English assignments. The project

established objectives in the English class for real-world applications. In meeting these objectives, the number of students who met the criteria required in life outside of school increased.

In order to prepare students for the writing demands of life outside of school, the writer obtained real-world scenarios compiled by business partners. The business partners also included the final documents which they had written in addressing the situation. These simulations provided students with the opportunity to practice communication skills, apply critical thinking in solving problems, research utilizing technology resources available in the media center, and apply the activities in a simulated business environment. The numerous objectives that must be addressed in English classes and time limitations often force teachers to assign writing activities that fail to simulate business situations. The writer assigned an activity developed by a business leader which required an in-depth written response. The assignment required students to realize the problem solving, language usage, and writing skills that are demanded for life outside of school.

The practicum writer was a facilitator to ensure each student had an opportunity to complete practical assignments and use technology, and the writer also was a coordinator in establishing networking that allowed students the opportunity to communicate with business leaders.

Report of Action Taken

The writer received unexpectedly exuberant responses from businesspersons when contacted to participate in a partnership with students. Out of ten who were requested to participate in submitting documents used in their workplace and writing

business scenarios, eight complied. The documents and scenarios were reviewed by the writer for planning and the possibility of integration of the activities with literature and writing units. The writer developed unit plans which included the businesspersons' documents and activities.

Students were introduced to various types of business forms and purposes of communication. They were given examples of business letters, memos, technical writings, order forms, and advertisements. The writer's purpose of each item was determined, and students critiqued the communications for strengths and weaknesses in informing or conveying the intended message to the reader. Each week students were required to use one format of business communication to address a situation in their own lives involving a business transaction. For example, if a student had had a problem making a purchase at a department store, the student was encouraged to complete a customer complaint form or write a letter to the store manager.

Students were introduced to computer software and the Internet after reading two major literary works. The characters in the selections, *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry and *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck, became a basis for discussion of workplace ethics and skills. Students were comfortable critiquing fictional characters and surmising which skills they possessed and which careers they would be successful in. Students worked in groups to determine how each character would response to various business situations. One activity required students to write a reprimand for a character who failed to call in or to show up for work.

The writer's classroom is equipped with two computers and outdated software; however, networking with the Media Center was scheduled to be completed within two

weeks of implementation of the practicum. The students were given an introductory mini-course in the use of the technology in the classroom and the Media Center. Through the Media Center, students had access to the Internet and software programs such as Microsoft word, PowerPoint, and Excel. To ease the students' anxieties, 4 Media Center Specialists were available to assist them.

Along with the weekly assignments of writing one form of business communication, students were required to write resumes for the characters in *Of Mice and Men* and *A Raisin in the Sun*. Students completed an employment survey for the character from the state's occupational software program. The information was used to determine the career that matched the character's skills. Student wrote the resumes and prepared a 6-slide PowerPoint presentation to convince the other students that the character was qualified for the job. Not only were the students learning technology and writing, they were also having fun in the process.

The writer had reviewed students' written assignments, business and other, and conferenced with each student on ways to improve his or her writing. Students were given small packets of writing exercises which addressed the weakness in the students' writing. For each exercise the student completed correctly, he or she received a letter of recommendation from the writer. These letters became a bragging item and students found a place in the room to display them. When the students had completed the packets, they asked if they could have another.

After each student had been assisted and he or she had completed the practice activities in the packet to strengthen his or her writing skills, the writer ceased to conference with students and required students to peer edit their work. By this time the

students were comfortable enough to be honest without ridiculing each other. They often disagreed and researched to locate evidence to resolve a matter. The writer intervened seldom and only when necessary for productivity to continue.

Students were introduced to the business scenarios and each student was responsible for choosing one scenario and preparing a written response using word processing software. A written response was due each 2-week period. Students also could bring in a business scenario, and upon the writer's approval, prepare a response based on the information in the scenario. Included in the scenario selections of which students could choose were:

- customer's complaint about a rude vendor in a grocery store,
- a long-time client of an insurance agency who is convinced she made a payment, but the company has not received it and has cancelled her insurance,
- a senior cruise cut short because of political problems at the destination point and the seniors, not following the travel agent's instructions, incurred significant additional expenses and are demanding a full refund plus those expenses they incurred on their own, and
- a car dealership owner who is faced with a national strike and has to find ways in which to cut expenses or will be forced to lay off employees.

Students were responsible for completing the assignments. No class time was scheduled in the computer lab; however, students could request a pass to the lab. The students remained responsible for material covered in class when they were not present. At the end of class each day, 30 minutes was provided for peer editing. No business communication was accepted until it was free of errors. Peer editors kept a log of items

and authors' names and the teacher signed the log when the item was accepted. The peer editor received a daily grade for each item accepted within three submittals.

The writer assigned a major project which required students to use the skills required in the previous assignments to prepare a career portfolio. The cumulative skills list included the ability to use technological tools, research using various media and assimilate and synthesize the information gathered for relevant data, and use written and oral communication skills in gathering and presenting the information. For the career portfolio, students completed a career interest survey from the state's occupational software program. As they had done with the literary characters in the previous assignment, they had to determine the career that matched their interests and their skills. Unlike the character resume assignment, the students now had to investigate the careers on the Internet, write an essay justifying their choices of careers, research and write a history of the careers, write research papers on the careers, interview people in the chosen career field and write follow-up thank you letters, refer to the on-line classified ads to determine the availability of employment in the career fields, write resumes and cover letters, and prepare and give PowerPoint presentations to the class.

Computer lab time was scheduled for students to work on the career portfolios during class time. The networking was completed and students could also utilize the two computers in the classroom. Many students opted to remain in the classroom although they had to schedule a time in order to gain access to the computers. When asked why they endured the inconvenience instead of using the computer lab, the students said that they felt more confident and comfortable in the classroom setting and with their teacher assisting them.

The final assignment for the unit was to write a letter to business leaders who developed the scenarios of business situations. Each student was required to write a thank-you letter and include in the letter if and/or how the use of the scenarios had enhanced his or her learning. After peer editing, students were assigned groups according to the business leader they had chosen to write. The group chose the letter that best expressed the students' feelings of the scenario experience and revised the letter. Students addressed envelopes and mailed the letters to the business leaders.

At the conclusion of the unit, students wrote evaluations of the assignments. Although the writer expected the usual student complaints of the unit's lengthy and difficult requirements, students were positive in their responses. The most agreed-upon item to be eliminated was the research paper, but the students chose to keep the research process requirement. The business scenarios were keepers; not one student chose to change or eliminate any of the scenario assignments.

The writer experienced many delays during implementation of the practicum. The computer networking into the classroom, which was scheduled prior to school beginning, was completed after the mid-point of the practicum implementation. During the attempts to network the school, computers were often inoperable or unavailable. Students were given flexible classroom time to complete assignments to compensate for the indeterminate availability of technological equipment. This situation provided the opportunity to discuss the impact of unforeseen delays when the workplace is dependent on technology in the production process or completing transactions.

The "down time" also afforded students the opportunity to discuss the weaknesses and strengths in the business scenario assignments and the businesspersons' responses.

Students were open and honest and the discussions began to resemble a corporate round table trouble-shooting session. An unexpected outcome became evident as students bonded and formed support groups that began to incorporate cooperative learning in assisting each other. Learning from other students alleviated much of the "technophoebia" associated with working with computers. Armed with a higher level of confidence, students began to explore the many facets of information gathering and presenting available via technology. The feeling of intimidation displayed by many students was not present in these students during oral presentations and presentations using graphic software.

Another unforeseen challenge was the inability of many students to role-play. Although the point of view of literary characters is taught and activities completed, the knowledge did not transfer to the business scenarios. Discussion and activities involving students and their parents in positive and negative business interactions became the stepping stones for in-depth solution strategies in the assignments.

Students became enthusiastic as the assignment took on real-life experiences, and many students turned in assignments prior to the deadline date. Their communication skills took on new dimensions and the words from weekly vocabulary lessons began to emerge in their written and oral language.

Chapter V: Results

Results

Life outside of schools requires competency in oral and written communications. Whether students are preparing for continuing education or the workplace, the ability to effectively use language to communicate and the manipulation of technology to enhance the impact of conveying the information to others is essential. Effective communication requires the ability to use various written forms and purposes such as literary critiques and documents used in the workplace.

Students' written communication falls short of the expectations of the business world. The opportunity to practice written assignments which simulate real-world business situations utilizing technology were not prevalent in the high school English classroom. The problem is intensified by the high school's high student-teacher ratio and the unavailability of technological equipment in the school setting.

The goal of this practicum was for English students to gain writing skills that meet the challenge of real-world applications. To met this goal, the writer integrated writing skills, input from business and community leaders, and the use of technology to allow students the opportunity to acquire the needed skills. The high school implemented an intense 4X4 schedule and the writer's schedule included only one section of Technical Preparatory English III which reduced the number of students to 31. During the implementation of the practicum, 5 students withdrew from school leaving only 26 students participating in the practicum. The technology utilization student survey (Appendix A), which was completed at the beginning of the practicum implementation, was completed again at the end of implementation. Although the number remained the

same for those having computers in the home, the results of the second survey reflected an increase of 10 students using computers in their homes and an increase of 6 students completing assignments on computers in their homes. The survey responses corresponding directly to the writer's proposed solutions were impressive.

1. The number of students demonstrating having used computer word processing software will increase from only 21 (52.5%) to at least 30 (75%) out of 40 students.

This outcome was met by 26 (100%) out of 26 students in the class.

2. The number of students who demonstrate having used the Internet will increase from only 28 (70%) to 35 (87.5%) out of 40 students.

This outcome was met by 24 (92.3%) out of 26 students in the class.

3. An increase from 18 (45%) to at least 25 (62.5%) out of 40 students will demonstrate having used computer software.

This outcome was met by 22 (84.6%) out of 26 students in the class.

4. Students meeting the criteria required for an English unit of writing skills for real-world applications will increase from 9 (20%) to at least 29 (64.4%) out of 45 who completed a portfolio of various business documents which integrated the use of technology and communication skills.

This outcome was met by 19 (73.1%) out of 26 students in the class.

Discussion

The use of word processing software programs to complete assignments on a regular basis proved to be effective in stimulating students to improve the quality of their

writing. The reduction of grammatical errors became greater with each assignment. The use of business documents afforded the students the opportunity to experience life outside school writing. Many students had seen memos, letters, customer complaint forms, order forms, and company reports in their own work settings. The assignments were more meaningful to students as they completed each document in preparation for tasks requiring skills that are expected in the workplace. Although many students deemed themselves as adequately skilled in writing, they soon realized an error-free document was not produced without much effort.

As students wrote and rewrote, they gained an appreciation for word processing software and the ability to edit swiftly and virtually effortlessly with the stroke of a few command keys on a keyboard. Several students became creative; although, the results of entertaining documents were not acceptable in the business world, the students were learning to manipulate technology. During these bursts of creativity, the writer learned how to rescue students' work lost during moments of over-confidence.

One student used the analogy to compare his first error- ridden written document to his room. Although his room was perfectly decorated, the visitor could not see the beauty for the strewn clothes and trash. This became the metaphor for correcting written assignments completed using word processing software. Students became partners in "cleaning up their rooms" allowing the reader to appreciate the context of their writing. Although a few students were apprehensive about using computers, others rallied to their aid using humor and self-critiques to alleviate the uneasiness.

After student-teacher conferences, students demonstrated less apprehension and more confidence in their writing abilities. As packets were distributed to each student,

the writer was concerned that motivation was diminishing; however, students immediately began the writing exercises in the packets. Students expressed feelings of being overwhelmed when entire writing pieces containing a variety of errors were to be revised. Students deemed the exercises to be more approachable and less intimidating. Once students realized the exercises were more comprehensible and complex than the required revisions in their written pieces, they gained the confidence needed to begin to question and seek advice from peers. Students became tools for each other to expand their writing and thinking abilities.

The writer's classroom began to resemble the work area of a corporate office as students scrambled to get to computers or sat with peers discussing problems with accessing technological tools or revisions to written documents. Reluctant participates were attracted to the lively conversations, and interpersonal skills were built as writing skills were improved. To strive for higher levels of written context and depth, students would forgo the comfort felt at the accomplished level of skills and begin a challenge to reach deeper within themselves. The errors would flourish until sentence structure and punctuation were mastered. To accommodate students in the learning process, the writer allowed more time than planned for students to work on revision.

By the time the networking was complete at the high school and the students gained access to the Internet, they had become more comfortable in the use of computers and met this new challenge with enthusiasm. Several students had Internet access at home and became teachers. The writer became an observer during visits to the media center computer lab while students actively engaged in searching for relevant data to complete assignments. As part of a career portfolio which included a resume, cover

letter, letter of inquiry, an interview follow-up letter and other career related activities and documents, students were required to search the Internet for information about employment opportunities. The Internet browsing was the most meaningful activity according to students. The information students included in the career portfolios was relevant and insightful about careers they were interested in pursuing in the future. Student interaction created a cohesiveness among the students that the writer had not anticipated.

The high school has strict rules and regulations regarding Internet access. Each student must have his or her parent or guardian's signature on a permission statement in the student's yearly planner or Internet usage is denied. Although the students had parental permission, the writer was apprehensive of students tapping into inappropriate information. After only a short time observing the student, the writer found no indication the students were straying from the assigned task. They were energetic and eagerly sharing each tidbit of retrieved information. The writer extended the completion date of the assignment to allow students to explore their career interests in cyberspace. The extension proved to be more than a time factor; it motivated students. One student expressed his feelings when he reflected about how cool it was to be treated like an adult. To clarify, the writer questioned the students and found the students felt they were given the responsibility to complete the project but were allowed to accomplish the task with limited teacher interference. Relevance to the workplace and deadlines was discussed, and teacher involvement in assigned tasks dissipated after reviewing the requirements.

The use of graphic software was evidenced by student presentations of characterizations from novels and plays, such as *Of Mice and Men* and *A Raisin in the*

Sun. As students learned to create slide shows on PowerPoint software, the frustration of losing files and the downtime while computers were being networked became apparent. Students began to display signs of losing interest. The writer rescheduled the visits to the media center and extended the deadline date. With these new provisions, students were soon inviting the writer and other teachers to the media center to view their slide shows. By the time class presentations were given, most students had shown their slide shows in small groups, but students were anxious to view the entire presentations. Students requested the opportunity to complete another graphic presentation even if it meant a research paper was required. Students were dissatisfied with the presentations and felt they could improve on the quality of written information and visuals. The writer has seldom experienced students requesting additional assignments with high grading standards; therefore, the students' requests were granted.

Improvement of students' writing skills was not remarkable; however, the quality did improve throughout the duration of implementation of the practicum. The most remarkable aspect of the outcome of the business scenario assignments was the breadth which students' thinking expanded during the process of creating valid responses and solutions. As students improved with the role playing necessary to gain a thorough understanding of the actions needed, their written language evolved to a higher level of sophistication. A student who struggled with writing claimed writing was his girlfriend, and it was a love-hate relationship. When asked to explain, he said that he loved the content and requirements of the assignments and loved to write a response, but hated to reflect on the grammatical corrections that were inevitable. The writer deems this a

success; at least he was revising his writing. Many students began to expand their vocabulary usage and assisted others in better word choices as they proofed papers.

As the term came toward the end, students expressed a deep regret of moving on to another schedule. The bond they had secured during the intense writing and technology experience had transcended student relations and created deep, caring friendships. A strong respect for each other resonated throughout the classroom as students presented their final written products.

Recommendations

1. Educators must incorporated opportunities for business, vocational, and English curriculum to mesh in order to create a real-world environment.
2. Teams of teachers need to plan and develop portfolio activities which must meet standards demanded in the business world and are required in two or more content areas which connect the curriculum.
3. Business partnerships need to be established in all content areas to reinforce the relevance of learning activities to students.
4. Teachers need to allow students the time necessary for revision and reflection during the writing process.

Dissemination

The writer's high school has grade level department teams which plan units; therefore, the implementation strategies and results have been shared with members of the English department. Other school faculty and district members will be informed of the results upon approval. The writer plans to write and submit an article to professional journals of educators in the English content area. The chairpersons in English

departments of other high schools in the districts will be provided with copies of the practicum.

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APPENDIX A

TECHNOLOGY UTILIZATION – STUDENT SURVEY

Appendix

Technology Utilization – Student Survey

Directions: Please read the questions carefully and answer as accurately as possible. Respond to the following questions by placing an **X** by "Yes" or "No." If you check "Yes," *please indicate to the right how often you use the equipment: Often, Sometime, Seldom.*

1. Do you have a computer in your home?

   ___Yes ___No ___Often ___Sometime ___Seldom

2. Do you use the computer in your home?

   ___Yes ___No ___Often ___Sometime ___Seldom

3. Do you use a computer for class assignments?

   ___Yes ___No ___Often ___Sometime ___Seldom

The following questions apply to school use only.

3. Have you used graphic software?

   ___Yes ___No ___Often ___Sometime ___Seldom

4. Have you used word processing software?

   ___Yes ___No ___Often ___Sometime ___Seldom

5. Have you used the Internet?

   ___Yes ___No ___Often ___Sometime ___Seldom

Comments: